

What's on your mind?

This past week we have lost another great witness of Christian faith. While some people may not be familiar with the name of Brother Roger, the name of what he founded is well-known today in churches of many denominations: The Taizé Community. He may be famous for the favourite meditative songs we often sing, but one of his greatest deeds was hiding Jews from the Nazis during World War II.

There are others who have done what was then considered criminal and unpatriotic, but are remembered today as the righteous among nations: Father Dietrich Bonhoeffer attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Corrie Ten Boom and her entire family were sent to a concentration camp for hiding a Jewish family. All but Corrie died in prison, and she was released only by miraculous clerical mistake even though she was scheduled to be executed. Consul Chiune Sugihara of Japan defied the order of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and issued thousands of transit visas to a desperate crowd of Jewish men, women and children so they could escape Lithuania and emigrate to the Netherlands Antilles through Siberia, China and Japan. They were all punished for their alleged crimes of being a traitor who unpatriotically gave aid and support to the enemies. Yet, they stood on the right side of history, and right side of God's will, and their names are remembered today in movies, taught in schools and immortalised in numerous statues.

It is often said that one thing people learn from history is that we do not learn from it. Likewise, we know that there is nothing new under the sun. One of the reasons why the Bible is such a long-time favourite of all times is that the stories and dramas in the Scriptures are all archetypal of what we all go through as individuals and communities. We can therefore draw lessons from this anthology of ancient books, and still receive fresh and timely inspirations. In the Bible we can find stories of liberation and stories of triumph over hatred. This book is not a monopolized property of the Religious Right. This is not a Republican book. This is not a Democrat book. This is not a book to promote slavery, sexism, terrorism, genocide, classism, or any number of evils. This book is our story. This book is your story. This book contains a history of people who survived the trauma of oppression and grew with each other and through their interaction with God as they sought and fought for freedom.

When you read the Bible, I encourage you to put yourself inside the story -- imagine yourself as a biblical character and see how his or her story can be similar to your own struggles, hopes and pains.

In this week's lectionary reading, we find a story of increased xenophobia and anti-foreigner sentiment leading to the inauguration of a new head of state who carries out a genocide, enslavement and mistreatment of one ethnic group.

The Genesis passage starts out with this all-so-familiar statement: "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." (1:9, 10)

Try substituting the word "Israelite" with "Mexican" or "Arab." And sure we do remember the mass paranoia only four years ago whenever we saw anyone who looked even remotely like a Muslim.

Does this start to sound a lot like the United States of the 21st century? Sure, we may not have an outright slavery, but we have an ever-growing jails to arbitrarily incarcerate unconvicted non-criminal, non-violent foreigners, often teenagers and children; several high-profile round-ups of foreigners, such as the NSEERS special registration after 9/11 and recent charter-flight mass deportations of Mexican migrant workers; and divisive and manipulative politicians pushing for anti-foreigner laws such as REAL ID Act and REAL GUEST Act often through a highly dishonest political tactic to avoid the bill to be meaningfully debated on. Also we have a growing movement not only against undocumented immigrants but also all non-white immigration, manifesting into quasi-vigilantism such as the Minutemen. Their inflammatory, deceptive and irresponsible rhetoric is beginning to show a striking similarity with that of Ku Klux Klan. In fact,



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*Proper 16, Year A
Sunday, August 21, 2005*

*By Sarah-Andrea Morrigan
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*Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20*

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KKK did not start out with the infamous cross-burning and lynching of black people; KKK's first target was immigration, particularly immigration from Catholic nations and non-white ethnic groups. KKK started out by a political strategy, which is very similar to what these "pro-enforcement, pro-reform" politicians, anti-immigrant lobby and groups such as the Minuteman Project are now utilising.

As they prepare for the 2006 midterm election, political strategists position immigration debates as the next wedge issue. In 2004 it was homosexuality. During the Clinton era, it was abortion. It is likely that in next two general elections the question of "what to do with those 10 million illegal aliens" will be the ultimate political litmus test. We must be vigilant against any political movement and campaign that promote further destruction of human rights for non-citizens and even for citizens in the name of "immigration reform" and "war on terror."

In the verse eight, we learn that there was a new king in Egypt, who did not know Joseph. Of course, "did not know" is both the operative words and the misleading words here. Being a prime minister, Joseph was the second most powerful person in the Egyptian Empire. There is no way anyone in a royal family, especially an heir apparent who were about to become the next Pharaoh, would not know Joseph. But he may not have "known" Joseph in a more familiar way. It was also possible that the achievements of Joseph were about to be forgotten now that the country had gone past the seven-year famine and went back to the former affluence. Either case, we tend to forget the achievements of immigrants and their contributions to the civilisation and to the nation. Often we do not learn about their lives even in the history class, so we become ignorant of the history and whenever the xenophobic propaganda offers a false sense of comfort and security during difficult times, we buy right into it.

Especially during the time of armed conflicts and economic hardship, such fear, suspicion and hatred of those who are not like ourselves spread like wildfire. During the American Civil War, the 1930s as the world experienced the Great Depression, during World War II, after 9/11, we can find plenty of real examples.

This is not just a "white man's" problem. Those who are people of colour, and those who are immigrants or immigrants' kids, are just as equally guilty of this tendency. An interesting news story last week was that Pew Hispanic Research showed that about 50 percent of U.S.-born Latinos in fact support the type of "immigration reform and enforcement" proposals the anti-immigration groups are lobbying for. And as we saw in the 1990s, the hostility between Asians and Black Americans can sometimes escalate into violent conflicts, even a riot like the one in Los Angeles. In the world of American professional boxing, it is usually the oppressed race of any particular time period that becomes champions. So there were Italian boxers, Jewish boxers, Irish boxers, Slavic boxers and then Black boxers. One of the recurring themes of American ethnic melting pot is that an ethnic group that was established earlier usually resent, hate and bully the newer-comers. They too were often afraid that these newer immigrants will ruin what they have worked so hard for.

So they too forget the struggles, oppressions and achievements of their earlier days.

In this chapter of Genesis we learn about two brave women, midwives by the names of Puah and Shifrah, who defied the order of the absolute sovereign ruler (risking their own lives, of course) to save the Israelite babies from the Pharaoh's attempt at genocide. Of course, these two were not the only midwives and certainly did not stop or end all genocide. But what is important is that they "feared God" more than Pharaoh, and as a direct result of their action they allowed the future leader of the Israelites to be born and survive. Shifrah and Puah may have been executed; they may have been of old age by the time Moses was born. It could be very likely that neither Shifrah nor Puah had seen this baby Moses since they let the boy float down the river. But their action nevertheless counts in the eyes of God, and we know that their courage and righteousness are immortalized for millennia, even though this was obviously a criminal act back then.

Why did they this? Fear of God.

Fear takes essentially the same mental process as faith. Whereas faith believes that what you believe for will happen, fear believes that what you are afraid of will hap-



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pen. So fear of God is really a faith for God. Shifrah and Puah had the faith that kept themselves accountable for God even though that meant committing a treason against this national security directive from the most powerful man on the planet.

In the other reading, Romans chapter 12, Paul talks about mind. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." (v. 2) What we think in our little minds is where we start making a difference.

Someone, a very devout Christian committed to global social and economic justice, asked a question after watching *What the Bleep Do We (K)now*: Isn't all this positive thinking and manifesting good things and creating your own life with thoughts stuff just too hedonistic?

Well, is your mind dominated by thoughts of fear that only things that can happen in this world are oppression, hunger, disease and violence? Is your mind dominated by thoughts of cynicism that whatever you do won't do much so not as well do anything at all? Is your mind dominated by thoughts fed by our parents, teachers, mass media and dominant consumerist paradigm that say nothing will change, do not rock the boat, don't question authority even if they are doing things that are obviously wrong, and so on? Is your mind dominated by the thought that you are nothing more than an insignificant cog in the machinery of global capitalism, worth nothing more than a piece of paper you receive once every other year for a ballot, only as valuable as your "net worth"? Does your mind stop you from doing what is right because of fear or doubt? Does your mind contest what God says about you? It's pretty much in your mind that's stopping you, isn't it? Even in the darkest of all circumstances, your mind can create and begin a change, not only in your own life but around you and even beyond. Sometimes, minds of a handful of people can tear down walls, overthrow dictatorship, cause revolutions, alter the course of history, give birth to a new nation, invent things that would save and improve lives of millions, and stop decades of wars. Don't underestimate that.

This is why Paul says "renew your mind." Not in a self-improvement pep talk kind of way, but "according to the measure of faith" being transformed into the image of Christ. And along with that, it is important not to let your mind sit alone, just thinking but not doing anything. "I appeal to you...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (v. 2.) The renewal of mind must lead to a life that is directed by the Spirit of God.

In the Genesis passage we find two kinds of people, with two types of mindset. The predominant mass culture and the ruling class subscribed to the mind of fear, forgetfulness, ignorance and arrogance. This mind says, "Hey, these sub-human aliens from that Third World country are invading and running over our nation! Their population is growing, and soon they'll destroy our way of life, suck up our resources and bankrupt our country. Let's make sure they have no human rights or civil liberties. Let's make sure that they're always under our control."

The other mindset is of Shifrah and Puah. Their minds were so transformed that they were not even afraid of talking back at the Pharaoh and risk their own lives. They believed in the value of those babies' lives and all the potentials they had as they grew into adulthood many years later. And most importantly, they were able to discern what was the right thing to do, even when all the people and culture around them had another idea. This mindset was also that of Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie Ten Boom, Chiune Sugihara, Susan B. Anthony, Emma Goldman, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and of course Brother Roger of Taizé.

All their great acts of righteousness first originated in their little minds between their ears.

Let us ask ourselves also: What is on our minds?

Then let us start from there.



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